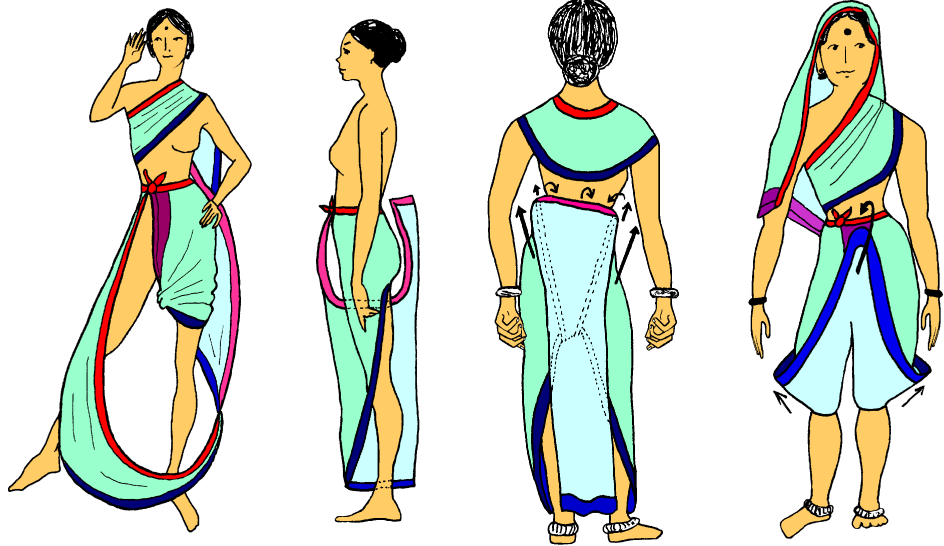


# SARIS: An Illustrated Guide to the Indian Art of Draping

Text and Illustrations  
by  
Chantal Boulanger



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Of all the arts that have flourished in India, one of the least known and studied is that of draping. This is all the more extraordinary because it is a unique art and craft which offers special insights into the ethnology of Indian and South-East Asian peoples and the archaeology of the periods in which it developed.

I have spent years researching sari drapes and recording over 100 different styles of draping. My findings bring out new ways for classifying Indian costumes and open different perspectives on the meaning of drapes. It demonstrates that most saris fit into a few “families” corresponding to ethnic origins.

Saris are also the expression of women's creativity and could inspire anyone. I don't believe that these drapes should simply be recorded and then be confined to dusty libraries in the future. Drapes have many advantages over stitched clothes, especially when beauty is an important value. Saris are much more practical than we think, especially since they can be so easily modified.

Saris are fun to wear. From the material of this book, they can be tried by anyone, and more styles can be created. By teaching workshops on draping, I have learned that there is for each woman one drape that fits her perfectly. It's not often the modern sari, and can be any of the styles in this book, or even one the woman invents for herself. So I made this work for anybody who wants, at least once, to wear a drape, any kind of drape.

Draping is an art. I hope this book will help it take its place as a heritage of mankind.



Written and illustrated by Chantal Boulanger



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# Introduction

Of all the arts that have flourished in India, one of the least known and studied is that of draping. This is all the more extraordinary because it is a unique art and craft which offers special insights into the ethnology of Indian and South-East Asian peoples and the archaeology of the periods in which it developed. At its heart is Hinduism whose preference for unstitched clothing, for both religious and social reasons, fostered the growth and development of the sari. Although knowledge of sewn garments has existed since prehistoric times, these were mostly reserved for warriors and kings, and never achieved the popularity of drapes. Therefore, the Indian culture developed the art of wrapping a piece of cloth around the body to a degree that far surpassed that of any other people. Unfortunately, this art has never been fully studied. Books on saris usually show a maximum of 10 or 15 drapes and too few explain how to drape them. Most of these studies have been done by men who have never experimented with the drapes themselves.

When I was studying Tamil temple priests, I learned that the women draped their saris in a special way, using a piece of cloth 9 yards long. It is a well-known fact that Tamil Brahmins, such as the *Coorg*, Bengali or *Marwari* women, have their own peculiar way of wearing saris. Yet, nobody had noticed the way Tamil peasant or Kannadiga labourers draped theirs – and neither had I.

My interest was aroused at a wedding. Among the guests, I saw a woman who wore a drape I had never noticed before. I took her picture and started looking in books in order to learn how to drape her style. After a year and many books, I realized that this kind of drape had never previously been recorded. I tried to find a woman who could teach it to me, but this was not easy because only a few old women knew how to do it. Finally, I studied how to drape that particular sari, and I gave it a name for my records. Since this drape is worn by peasant women in a region of Tamil Nadu called Tondaimandalam, I called it the “Tondaimandalam sari”.

Having discovered that sari draping had never been properly researched, I decided to record as many drapes as I could find. As I travelled throughout South, Central and Eastern India, I realised that the whole subject was far too big for my own researches to be exhaustive. I hope, however, that this work will lead others to carry on this research all over India. Apart from the few famous saris recorded in the past I found a large number of drapes, most often typical of a caste or a small region. Only worn by old women, the majority of them will be forgotten in a few decades.

The modern drape, often called *nivi* sari, is now worn by most Indian women. Few even bother to learn from their grandmothers how to attire themselves traditionally. This is especially true with the lower castes, where girls refuse to dress in a way that clearly displays their humble origins. We can no doubt consider as social progress the disappearance of caste-marking drapes, but this is no excuse to forget them.

As the following chapters will show, draping is a subtle art where what seems at first sight to be similar may actually be very different. It is important to study and preserve every kind of drape. It is a part of the world’s heritage which might very well be lost forever if we don’t record it with method and precision.

# I Perspectives

To describe in detail over 80 different ways of draping a sari may seem merely anecdotal and even pedantic. Yet all the studies on Indian clothing have overlooked the extraordinary precision and care that have been devoted to draping in its many forms. Numerous books have been written on textiles, and saris have been studied at great length as such, yet how the cloth is worn has not been considered important. Draping, which is so closely linked with fashion, has been deemed utterly trivial by academics, but just as, in the Western world, fashion tells us about society, so draping tells us much about the Indian and Hindu culture.

Classifying drapes according to method rather than by region leads to interesting conclusions. The classification imposed itself as I developed my research. I had originally planned to present my study by region, as everyone else has done so far. But I soon realised that this approach made no sense at all. Arranging drapes according to their method of production gave not only a new perspective on the study of saris, but also opened up a whole new level of meaning as to their function and purpose. Within each category, the study of the detailed variations showed interesting clues, especially about the evolution and significance of draping.

“Show me how you drape, and I will tell you who you are” could be the motto for this book. Drapes are closely linked with the ethnic origin of the wearer, and in Chapter 7 I will detail the conclusions that I reached from this study. My aim in this section is to make clear that the detailed study of saris is not merely a question of classification for classification’s sake: for instance, the ethnologists and archaeologists can draw a lot from it.

The ethnologist can discover in traditional clothing what are the origins of the group and how it has been influenced by others. For instance, the *Aiyar* sari derives from a *dhoti* (typically high-caste when worn by women) but starts with a *kosu*, a kind of pleating which is the mark of Tamil (non-Brahmin) saris. The archaeologist can use clothing not only to determine the period, but also to discover clues regarding the ethnic origins of the people represented.

To draw meaningful conclusions from draping, it is essential to study it in detail and have an intimate knowledge of the procedure. The *Aiyar* sari is mentioned in numerous studies, but so far nobody had noticed that it contains a *kosu*, or that the *kosu* is so typical of Tamil saris. The only way to understand my conclusions is, therefore, to appreciate and comprehend fully the way drapes are produced. The social and historical meanings of draping often lie in hidden, minute details.

Indian drapes can also be placed in a much larger context. Draping was very common in Antiquity and is still found in most countries of South-East Asia. This work will help any future studies on draped clothing, not only in India but also in South-East Asia where it comes from the same basic drapes. Historians and archaeologists should find here many helpful clues that can be applied to any kind of drape.

I started this research totally unaware of its wide implications (not to mention the time and effort!). Thinking that I would save a few drapes from fast-approaching oblivion, I discovered a totally unexplored world whose meaning had never been considered. I will explore some of this in my last chapter, which, by itself, fully justifies the lengthy explanations of its preceding pages.

## II Methodology

### A Field research

Researching drapes requires travelling through as many villages and regions as possible, looking at everybody to identify precisely what they wear, and asking everyone if they know or have seen different ways of draping. Once I found an unknown drape, I not only saw how it was produced from the person who usually wore it, but I also learned how to do it myself. It was very important for me to be able to wear it. Since this might seem a little extreme, here is an anecdote which will illustrate the necessity.

I always thought I knew how to wear a *kaccha* sari, such as worn in North Karnataka and Maharashtra. All I had to do was to drape a modern sari with 9 yards, so as to have many pleats in front. Then I had to take the lower border of the middle pleat and tuck it in the back. When I went to the region where these saris were worn, I did not bother at first to learn how to drape them. Problems started when I decided to go out wearing a *kaccha* sari. It was in Goa and I went to a Hindu temple, where I was clearly conspicuous. Most people appreciated my efforts, but at one point, a woman, seeing me, shouted something in Konkani and everybody laughed. My assistant was reluctant to translate, but eventually he explained that the woman had said: “The way she wears her sari, all the boys are going to fall in love with her!”

I understood that something was wrong with my draping and immediately I sent my assistant to find someone who could teach me how to wear it properly. A few minutes later, a woman showed me many of the finer details which prevent this kind of drape from crumpling up and backwards, revealing the thighs.

On another day, visiting Ellora, I realised that when I walked and moved a lot with a *kaccha* sari, despite all that I had learnt, the cloth was still crumpling up on my back. I had to stop every five minutes to pull the folds back into place. Then I noticed a Maharashtrian woman who had the same problem as myself. Suddenly she stopped, grabbed a fold of her sari from between her legs, pulled it and tucked it in front. I immediately understood why she had done that, and the effect it had on the drape. I was bending down to repeat the gesture when she saw me. Without a word, she realised everything and came towards me to teach me the final detail to prevent this kind of sari from crumpling up away from the thighs which it should hide.

A sari moves. Unless we fully understand how it moves, and what small details make it move properly, we cannot really grasp how it is draped. When researching, I thought it essential to wear the drapes I was studying, not just once in a room, but also in normal living conditions.

I have travelled quite extensively through Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. I have also visited Goa, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and West Bengal, although not as thoroughly. A short trip in Assam convinced me that there is much to learn in this area. Exhaustive research would have meant visiting almost every village and caste in India, a task far too difficult for me. This may again sound a little extreme, but many drapes are worn by small castes, and may only be found in a village or two.

For instance, the *Kappulu* sari, one of the most interesting and elegant drapes I have found, is worn only by old women of the *Kappulu* caste. I noticed it completely by chance on a woman crossing the road outside Masulipatnam (Andhra Pradesh). Although I had crisscrossed the region asking as many people as I could if they knew different ways of

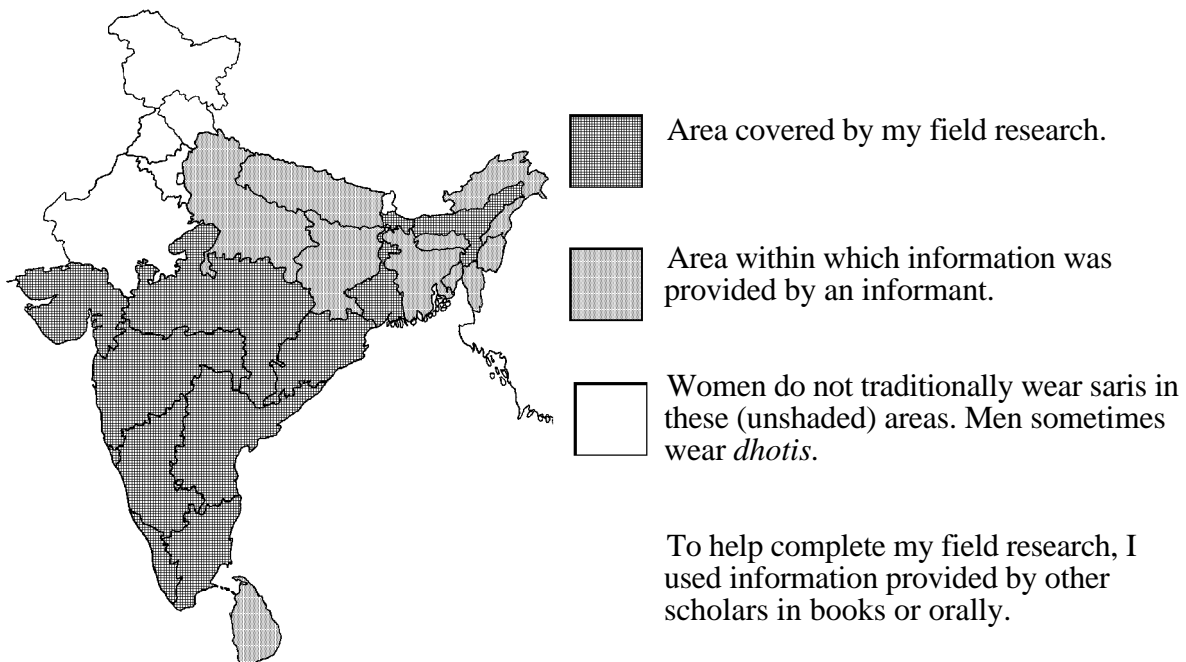
## 4 Introduction

draping, nobody had said anything about this style. As we were going back to Vijayawada, a woman crossed the street right in front of our car. My driver turned towards me and said: “Do you know how to drape this sari?” To my surprise I realised that I had no idea such a sari existed. We found the woman in a roadside tea shop, and she had no difficulty in teaching me the drape. It took me an unusually long time to grasp the intricacies of a sari which is quite unique, and which couldn’t fit within any of my classifications. I have never seen this drape outside this village.

This anecdote illustrates the need for a thorough survey. I also understood that day that I would never be able to complete my work.

I have asked many women to teach me how to drape their saris. Most of them were unknown to me, and I had simply met them in the street. None refused and every one of them, from the educated Brahmin to the illiterate tribeswoman, understood what I was doing and why. They were all pleased with my work and entrusted to me their knowledge with pride.

### B Additional research



For antique drapes, the work of Anne-Marie Loth, *La vie publique et privée dans l'Inde ancienne, fascicule VII, les costumes* (1979), is the most detailed and complete book available on draping. I will mention in the bibliography several other books which have been helpful.

For Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Nepal, I relied on information from Linda Lynton-Singh, who is a textile specialist and who had learnt several drapes from North-East India (her husband is from Bihar). Thambal Yaima showed me the two styles draped in Manipur. She also described a third style, worn by Manipur dancers, which requires a partially stitched cloth and hence is not included in this book. Mrs Ruklanthi Jayatissa helped me with the saris worn in Sri Lanka.

## Warning:

Following are some sample pages from the book. Please keep in mind that basic techniques and specific terminology (words such as “closing”, etc.) were introduced and described in details in the introduction. Without them, it is a little difficult to fully understand the text.

To write about draping in the most precise and clear manner, I had to create a vocabulary describing each part of the sari and each basic drape. The few existing Indian words were often too vague to be used here without being redefined. I have tried to keep popular expressions when possible. Since most of the terms I needed did not really exist, I made them up, borrowing mostly from Sanskrit and Tamil.

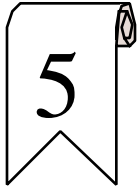
Here, the word *sari* is used both in the sense of a piece of cloth (a 7-yard sari) and as a kind of drape (the *Kappulu* sari). Since it is both at the same time, I don't think that this will be confusing. **I have applied this word to cover female and male wear.** For instance, what is usually called a *dhoti*, a kind of drape worn nowadays exclusively by men, is called here a sari in both senses (a cloth of 5 yards and a kind of drape). *Dhoti* simply qualifies the drape. It could be referred to as a “*dhoti* sari”. This departs widely from the normal usage of both words. There are several reasons for this choice. We must remember that such a drape was commonly worn by both men and women in the past, and that many women still wear saris that I will qualify as *dhoti* drapes.

## Definition of a “sari”

In this book, a sari is defined in two ways:

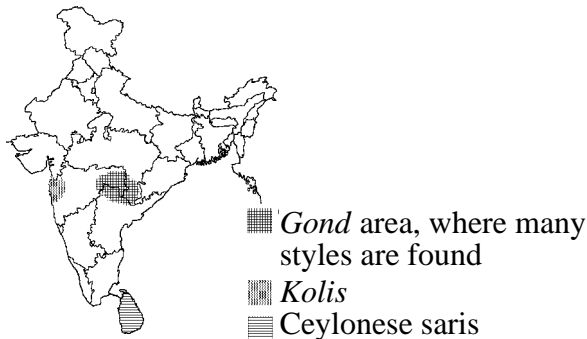
- (i) **a piece of cloth, of varying dimensions, draped to form the main garment;**
- (ii) **a kind of drape.**

The names of saris, such as *Marwari*, *Kappulu*, Salem, follow as much as possible what informants called them. But Indians rarely name drapes with precision. When a sari is characteristic of a specific caste or of a particular region, naming it was easy. The *Marwari* sari is worn in Maharashtra. For a few it was more complicated and in these cases I used the name of the town or village in which I first saw them.



## GOND-RELATED SARIS

Usually a family of saris coincides with a definable group of ethnic or local communities. For instance, Tamil saris are worn by non-Brahmin Tamil castes. With tribal drapes, it is hard to relate the styles of a family to a specific set of tribes. The *Coorgs*, the *Pullaiyars* and the *HallakiGaudas* wear similar saris. Yet they are very different in culture, physical appearance and social status, and live in places ranging from a hot sea-coast to a cold mountain top (although all are in South-Western India).



This is also true of the *Gond*-related family. Some communities wearing these saris are very far apart from each other; they do not speak the same language or share anything in common. One of them is not even Indian. Yet, their drapes are clearly related to the *Gond* sari, of which many variations are found on women of all castes living in what was the *Gond* kingdom. It would be interesting (and beyond the scope of this study!) to find out why.

The cloth of these styles is first arranged on the left shoulder (the upper part of the body). It is then draped clockwise from the shoulder to around the hips. The closing in most of these saris is typical of this family: a knot is simply tucked in the upper border as it passes under the right arm, coming from the left shoulder and going around the waistline.

These drapes are somewhat similar to the *Lingayat* sari (see p. 65), which belongs to the *kaccha* family.

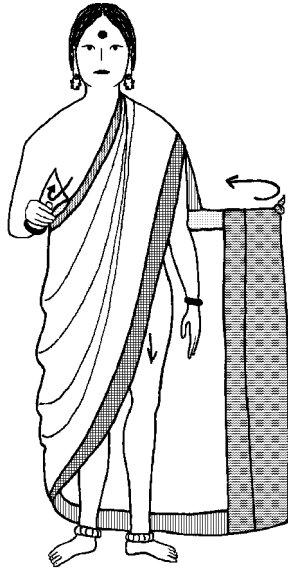
*Gond*-related saris are also different because they require a sari with two elaborate *pallavs*, or, as with the *Koli* sari, no marked *pallav* at all. Since one *pallav* is draped over the left shoulder and the other makes the closing on top of the sari, both ends of the cloth have an equal importance. The Telugu Brahmin (see p. 24) is the only sari that also requires a cloth with two elaborate *pallavs*, although its drape is in no way related to this family.

**Important note:** By convention, I will use the word *mundi* for the *pallav* used for the closing. I will call *mundanai* the part of the cloth covering the upper part of the body, ending with the *pallav*.



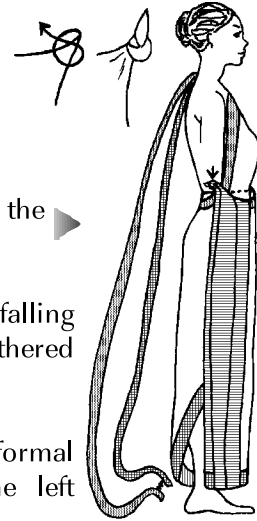
### A The *Gond* sari

The *Gonds* are a tribe living in Central India (mostly Eastern Maharashtra and Southern Madhya Pradesh). Their women wear a sari of coarse cotton with sometimes heavily embroidered *pallavs*. Its length is about 5 yds of a very thick cloth. It is usually worn without *choli* or petticoat.



◀ Throw the *pallav* and the long *mundanai* to the back, over the left shoulder. Leave just enough cloth in front to make the closing: pass the upper border (towards the *mundi*) across the chest from the left shoulder to under the right arm. Pass it around the waistline clockwise (in the back, under the left arm, across the abdomen).

▶ Make a knot with the upper corner of the *mundi* and tuck it in the upper border that already passes under the right arm (coming from the shoulder and going to the back).



▶ Pull the lower border so that it falls in front from the left shoulder to the right foot (under the *mundi*).

◀ The *mundi* should be in front of the legs, its edge falling vertically along the right leg. Most of the sari is gathered and drops in the back from the left shoulder.



◀ Gather the sari on the left shoulder, making informal pleats. Pass the sari across the back from the left shoulder to under the right arm.

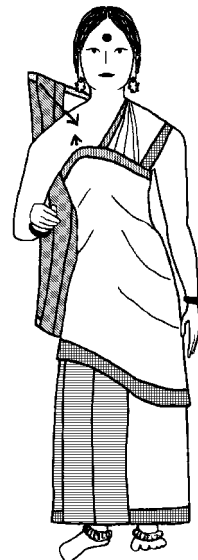
From that point of the drape, there are two variations. One style relates to the “right-shoulder” tribal saris while the other is more typical of the *Gond*-related family, in which the *pallav* is traditionally passed tightly around the waistline. Notice that the *mundi* is draped clockwise while the *pallav* goes counter-clockwise.

I will first describe the “right-shoulder” variation:

◀ Bring the upper border of the *mundanai* under the right arm and pull it over the right shoulder. Pass the remaining cloth under the left arm and across the back to the right shoulder.

◀ Make a knot with the upper corner of the *pallav* and the part of the upper border pulled in front of the right shoulder. (Since the cloth is coarse, it makes a big knot.)

For this style, you can easily manage with a 4 yd sari. The next variation requires at least 5 yds.





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